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How not to write a PhD thesis

Me gusta 65

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28 January 2010

In this guide, Tara Brabazon gives her top ten tips for doctoral failure

My teaching break between Christmas and the university's snowy reopening in January followed in the footsteps of Goldilocks and the three bears. I examined three PhDs: one was too big; one was too small; one was just right. Put another way, one was as close to a fail as I have ever examined; one passed but required rewriting to strengthen the argument; and the last reminded me why it is such a pleasure to be an academic.

Concurrently, I have been shepherding three of my PhD students through the final two months to submission. These concluding weeks are an emotional cocktail of exhaustion, frustration, fright and exhilaration. Supervisors correct errors we thought had been removed a year ago. The paragraph that seemed good enough in the first draft now seems to drag down a chapter. My postgraduates cannot understand why I am so picky. They want to submit and move on with the rest of their lives.

There is a reason why supervisors are pedantic. If we are not, the postgraduates will live with the consequences of "major corrections" for months. The other alternative, besides being awarded the consolation prize of an MPhil, is managing the regret of three wasted years if a doctorate fails. Every correction, each typographical error, all inaccuracies, ambiguities or erroneous references that we find and remove in these crucial final weeks may swing an examiner from major to minor corrections, or from a full re-examination to a rethink of one chapter.

Being a PhD supervisor is stressful. It is a privilege but it is frightening. We know – and individual postgraduates do not – that strange comments are offered in response to even the best theses. Yes, an examiner graded a magnificent doctorate from one of my postgraduates as "minor corrections" for one typographical error in footnote 104 in the fifth chapter of an otherwise cleanly drafted 100,000 words. It was submitted ten years ago and I still remember it with regret.

Another examiner enjoyed a thesis on "cult" but wondered why there were no references to Madonna, grading it as requiring major corrections so that Madonna references could be inserted throughout the script.

Examiners have entered turf wars about the disciplinary parameters separating history and cultural studies. Often they look for their favourite theorists – generally Pierre Bourdieu or Gilles Deleuze these days – and are saddened to find citations to Michel Foucault and Félix Guattari.

Then there are the "let's talk about something important – let's talk about me" examiners. Their first task is to look for themselves in the bibliography, and they are not too interested in the research if there is no reference to their early sorties with Louis Althusser in *Economy and Society* from the 1970s.

I understand the angst, worry and stress of supervisors, but I have experienced the other side of the doctoral divide. Examining PhDs is both a pleasure and a curse. It is a joy to nurture, support and help the academy's next generation, but it is a dreadful moment when an examiner realises that a script is so below international standards of scholarship that there are three options: straight fail, award an MPhil or hope that the student shows enough spark in the viva voce so that it may be possible to skid through to major corrections and a full re-examination in 18 months.

When confronted by these choices, I am filled with sadness for students and supervisors, but this is matched by anger and even embarrassment. What were the supervisors thinking? Who or what convinced the student that this script was acceptable?

Therefore, to offer insights to postgraduates who may be in the final stages of submission, cursing their supervisors who want

another draft and further references, here are my ten tips for failing a PhD. If you want failure, this is your road map to getting there.

1. Submit an incomplete, poorly formatted bibliography

Doctoral students need to be told that most examiners start marking from the back of the script. Just as cooks are judged by their ingredients and implements, we judge doctoral students by the calibre of their sources.

The moment examiners see incomplete references or find that key theorists in the topic are absent, they worry. This concern intensifies when in-text citations with no match in the bibliography are located.

If examiners find ten errors, then students are required to perform minor corrections. If there are 20 anomalies, the doctorate will need major corrections. Any referencing issues over that number and examiners question the students' academic abilities.

If the most basic academic protocols are not in place, the credibility of a script wavers. A bibliography is not just a bibliography: it is a canary in the doctoral mine.

2. Use phrases such as “some academics” or “all the literature” without mitigating statements or references

Generalisations infuriate me in first-year papers, but they are understandable. A 19-year-old student who states that “all women think that Katie Price is a great role model” is making a ridiculous point, but when the primary reading fodder is Heat magazine, the link between Jordan's plastic surgery and empowered women seems causal. In a PhD, generalisations send me off for a long walk to Beachy Head.

The best doctorates are small. They are tightly constituted and justify students' choice of one community of scholars over others while demonstrating that they have read enough to make the decision on academic rather than time-management grounds.

Invariably there is a link between a thin bibliography and a high number of generalisations. If a student has not read widely, then the scholars they have referenced become far more important and representative than they actually are.

I make my postgraduates pay for such statements. If they offer a generalisation such as “scholars of the online environment argue that democracy follows participation”, I demand that they find at least 30 separate references to verify their claim. They soon stop making generalisations.

Among my doctoral students, these demands have been nicknamed “Kent footnotes” after one of my great (post-) postgraduates, Mike Kent (now Dr Kent). He relished compiling these enormous footnotes, confirming the evidential base for his arguments. As he would be the first to admit, it was slightly obsessive behaviour, but it certainly confirmed the scale of his reading. In my current supervisory processes, students are punished for generalisations by being forced to assemble a “Kent footnote”.

3. Write an abstract without a sentence starting “my original contribution to knowledge is...”

The way to relax an examiner is to feature a sentence in the first paragraph of a PhD abstract that begins: “My original contribution to knowledge is...” If students cannot compress their argument and research findings into a single statement, then it can signify flabbiness in their method, theory or structure. It is an awful moment for examiners when they – desperately – try to find an original contribution to knowledge through a shapeless methods chapter or loose literature review. If examiners cannot pinpoint the original contribution, they have no choice but to award the script an MPhil.

The key is to make it easy for examiners. In the second sentence of the abstract, ensure that an original contribution is nailed to the page. Then we can relax and look for the scaffolding and verification of this statement.

I once supervised a student investigating a very small area of “queer” theory. It is a specialist field, well worked over by outstanding researchers. I remained concerned throughout the candidature that there was too much restatement of other academics' work. The scholarship is of high quality and does not leave much space for new interpretations.

Finally, we located a clear section in one chapter that was original. He signalled it in the abstract. He highlighted it in the introduction. He stressed the importance of this insight in the chapter itself and restated it in the conclusion. Needless to say, every examiner noted the original contribution to knowledge that had been highlighted for them, based on a careful and methodical understanding of the field. He passed without corrections.

4. Fill the bibliography with references to blogs, online journalism and textbooks

This is a new problem I have seen in doctorates over the past six months. Throughout the noughties, online sources were used in PhDs. However, the first cycle of PhD candidates who have studied in the web 2.0 environment are submitting their

doctorates this year. The impact on the theses I have examined recently is clear to see. Students do not differentiate between refereed and non-refereed or primary and secondary sources. The Google Effect – the creation of a culture of equivalence between blogs and academic articles – is in full force. When questioned in an oral examination, the candidates do not display that they have the capacity to differentiate between the calibre and quality of references.

This bibliographical flattening and reduction in quality sources unexpectedly affects candidates' writing styles. I am not drawing a causal link here: major research would need to be undertaken to probe this relationship. But because the students are not reading difficult scholarship, they are unaware of the specificities of academic writing. The doctorates are pitched too low, filled with informalities, conversational language, generalisations, opinion and unreflexive leaps between their personal "journeys" (yes, it is like an episode of *The X Factor*) and research protocols.

I asked one of these postgraduates in their oral examination to offer a defence of their informal writing style, hoping that the student would pull out a passable justification through the "Aca-Fan", disintermediation, participatory culture or organic intellectual arguments. Instead, the student replied: "I am proud of how the thesis is written. It is important to write how we speak."

Actually, no. A PhD must be written to ensure that it can be examined within the regulations of a specific university and in keeping with international standards of doctoral education. A doctorate may be described in many ways, but it has no connection with everyday modes of communication.

5. Use discourse, ideology, signifier, signified, interpellation, postmodernism, structuralism, post-structuralism or deconstruction without reading the complete works of Foucault, Althusser, Saussure, Baudrillard or Derrida

How to upset an examiner in under 60 seconds: throw basic semiotic phrases into a sentence as if they are punctuation. Often this problem emerges in theses where "semiotics" is cited as a/the method. When a student uses words such as "discourse" and "ideology" as if they were neutral nouns, it is often a signal for the start of a pantomime of naivety throughout the script. Instead of an "analysis", postgraduates describe their work as "deconstruction". It is not deconstruction. They describe their approach as "structuralist". It is not structuralist. Simply because they study structures does not mean it is structuralist. Conversely, simply because they do not study structures does not mean it is poststructuralist.

The number of students who fling names around as if they are fashion labels ("Dior", "Derrida", "Givenchy", "Gramsci") is becoming a problem. I also feel sorry for the students who are attempting a deep engagement with these theorists.

I am working with a postgraduate at the moment who has spent three months mapping Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* over media-policy theories of self-regulation. It has been frustrating and tough, creating – at this stage – only six pages of work from her efforts. Every week, I see the perspiration on the page and the strain in the footnotes. If a student is not prepared to undertake this scale of effort, they must edit the thesis and remove all these words. They leave themselves vulnerable to an examiner who knows their ideological state apparatuses from their repressive state apparatuses.

6. Assume something you are doing is new because you have not read enough to know that an academic wrote a book on it 20 years ago

Again, this is another new problem I have seen in the past couple of years. Lazy students, who may be more kindly described as "inexperienced researchers", state that they have invented the wheel because they have not looked under their car to see the rolling objects under it. After minimal reading, it is easy to find original contributions to knowledge in every idea that emerges from the jarring effect of a bitter espresso.

More frequently, my problem as a supervisor has been the incredibly hardworking students who read so much that they cannot control all the scholarly balls they have thrown into the air. I supervise an inspirational scholar who is trying to map Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid" research over neoconservative theory. This is difficult research, particularly since she is also trying to punctuate this study with Stan Aronowitz's investigations of post-work and Henry Giroux's research into working-class education. For such students, supervisors have to prune the students' arguments to ensure that all the branches are necessary and rooted in their original contributions to knowledge.

The over-readers present their own challenges. For our under-readers, the world is filled with their own brilliance because they do not realise that every single sentence they write has been explored, extended, tested and applied by other scholars in the past. Intriguingly, these are always the confident students, arriving at the viva voce brimming with pride in their achievements. They are the hardest ones to assess (and help) through an oral exam because they do not know enough to know how little they know.

Helpful handball questions about the most significant theorists in their research area are pointless, because they have invented all the material in this field. The only way to create an often-debilitating moment of self-awareness is by directly questioning the script: "On p57, you state that the academic literature has not addressed this argument. Yet in 1974, Philippa Philistine published a book and a series of articles on that topic. Why did you decide not to cite that material?"

Invariably, the answer to this question – often after much stuttering and stammering – is that the candidate had not read the analysis. I leave the question hanging at that point. We could get into why they have not read it, or the consequences of leaving out key theorists. But one moment of glimpsing into the abyss of failure is enough to summon doubt that their “originality” is original.

7. Leave spelling mistakes in the script

Spelling errors among my own PhD students leave me seething. I correct spelling errors. They appear in the next draft. I correct spelling errors. They appear in the next draft. The night before they bind their theses, I stare at the ceiling, summoning the doctoral gods and praying that they have removed the spelling errors.

Most examiners will accept a few spelling or typographical mistakes, but in a word-processing age, this tolerance is receding. I know plenty of examiners who gain great pleasure in constructing a table and listing all the typographical and spelling errors in a script. Occasionally I do it and then I know I need to get out more.

Spelling mistakes horrify students. They render supervisors in need of oxygen. Postgraduates may not fail doctorates because of them, but such errors end any chance of passing quickly and without corrections. These simple mistakes also create doubt in the examiner’s mind. If superficial errors exist, it may be necessary to drill more deeply into the interpretation, methods or structure chosen to present the findings.

8. Make the topic of the thesis too large

The best PhDs are small. They investigate a circumscribed area, rather than over-egging the originality or expertise. The most satisfying theses – and they are rare – emerge when students find small gaps in saturated research areas and offer innovative interpretations or new applications of old ideas.

The nightmare PhD for examiners is the candidate who tries to compress a life’s work into 100,000 words. They take on the history of Marxism, or more commonly these days, feminism. They attempt to distil 100 years of history, theory, dissent and debate into a literature review and end up applying these complex ideas to Beyoncé’s video for Single Ladies.

The best theses not only state their original contribution to knowledge but also confirm in the introduction what they do not address. I know that many supervisors disagree with me on this point. Nevertheless, the best way to protect candidates and ensure that examiners understand the boundaries and limits of the research is to state what is not being discussed. Students may be asked why they made those determinations, and there must be scholarly and strategic answers to such questions.

The easiest way to trim and hem the ragged edges of a doctorate is historically or geographically. The student can base the work on Belgium, Brazil or the Bahamas, or a particular decade, governmental term or after a significant event such as 11 September 2001. Another way to contain a project is theoretically, to state there is a focus on Henry Giroux’s model of popular culture and education rather than Henry Jenkins’ configurations of new media and literacy. Such a decision can be justified through the availability of sources, or the desire to monitor one scholar’s pathway through analogue and digital media. Examiners will feel more comfortable if they know that students have made considered choices about their area of research and understand the limits of their findings.

9. Write a short, rushed, basic exegesis

An unfair – but occasionally accurate – cliché of practice-led doctorates is that students take three and a half years to make a film, installation or soundscape and spend three and a half weeks writing the exegesis. Doctoral candidates seem unaware that examiners often read exegeses first and engage with the artefacts after assessing if candidates have read enough in the field.

Indeed, one of my students recommended an order of reading and watching for her examiners, moving between four chapters and films. The examiner responded in her report – bristling – that she would not be told how to evaluate a thesis: she always read the full exegesis and then decided whether or not to bother seeing the films. My student – thankfully – passed with ease, but this examiner told a truth that few acknowledge.

Most postgraduates I talk with assume that the examiners rush with enthusiasm to the packaged DVD or CD, or that they will not read a word of the doctorate until they have seen the exhibition. This is the same assumption that inhibits these students in viva voces. They think that they will be able to talk about “art” and “process” for two hours. I have never seen that happen. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the exegesis and how it articulates the artefact.

Postgraduates entering a doctoral programme to make a film or create a sonic installation subject themselves to a time-consuming and difficult process. If the student neglects the exegesis until the end of the candidature and constructs a rushed document about “how” rather than “why” it was made, there will be problems.

The best students find a way to create “bonsai” exegeses. They prepare perfectly formed engagements with theory, method

and scholarship, but in miniature. They note word limits, demonstrate the precise dialogue between the exegesis and artefact, and show through a carefully edited script that they hold knowledge equivalent to the “traditional” doctoral level.

10. Submit a PhD with a short introduction or conclusion

A quick way to move from a good doctoral thesis to one requiring major corrections is to write a short introduction and/or conclusion. It is frustrating for examiners. We are poised to tick the minor corrections box, and then we turn to a one- or two-page conclusion.

After reading thousands of words, students must be able to present effective, convincing conclusions, restating the original contribution to knowledge, the significance of the research, the problems and flaws and further areas of scholarship. Short conclusions are created by tired doctoral students. They run out of words.

Short introductions signify the start of deeper problems: candidates are unaware of the research area or the theoretical framework. In the case of introductions and conclusions in doctoral theses, size does matter.

Hope washes over the start of a PhD candidature, but desperation and fear often mark its conclusion. There are (at least) ten simple indicators that prompt examiners to recommend re-examination, major corrections or – with some dismay – failure. If postgraduates utilise these guidelines, they will be able to make choices and realise the consequences of their decisions.

The lessons of scholarship begin with intellectual generosity to the scholars who precede us. Ironically – although perhaps not – candidatures also conclude there.

References :

Tara Brabazon is professor of media studies, University of Brighton.

Readers' comments

- **Catriona** 29 January, 2010

And tip number 11, for having a job after your PhD: 11. Don't submit a thesis in a fadingly trendy but eternally lightweight field, such as, erm, media studies.

- **dave** 29 January, 2010

#3 is frightening. If examiners are so dense, and students so unsure, that a tiny 'original contribution' has to be hauled out into the light and nailed to a flagpole to make them all feel better, they should all consider whether there's any value at all to their enterprise.

- **Ed Cayshon** 29 January, 2010

Some good stuff here, Tara. But some concerns:

re: Examining PhDs is both a pleasure and a curse

I think it's a pleasure, and an essential part of developing subjects - so, it's very far from a curse.

re: write a short, rushed, basic exegesis

I think this is interesting. Folks know the word here, but "exegesis" is a word used mostly in Australian practice-led research, not in British. So good tip, but showing its origins a little too much, Tara; something to consider further.

re: The best PhDs are small.

Disagree. The best are spectacular. That's the point.

Over all. re: your fine article. We really enjoyed your work but we'd like you to make some minor correctoins. You have up to six months to complete these. No, this is not a "resubmission", but we believe some of these corrections are quite significant, so we'd ask you to take care in addressing them. Other than that, we'd like to congratulate you - not least, because yours is an extremely clean typescript.

- **Earnest** 29 January, 2010

Introduction: I will show that academic rigor in some doctoral study is 30% actuality, 30% performance, 40% compromise. I will not state which particular programmes of doctoral study this formula applies to. My methodology is based on informal (non-scientific) observation, self-reflection, and hearsay.

I've spent 3 years as a full-time PhD student without ever having been informed of what the criteria for examination are, especially not in the kind of detail that can be gleaned from Tara Brabazon's article. I have the strong impression that, where any kind of artistic practice is a component of research, no-one really knows what these criteria are.

Brabazon is right: students can spend their doctoral study-time pursuing a practice. What's more, the discourse around that practice, even under the aegis of a PhD programme, can stay at the level of what is necessary to carry on practising, rather than what would be required to transform that practice, explicitly, into new elements of a formalised knowledge. The exemplars of humane knowledge cited by Brabazon have all produced what can be called a 'literature', whilst also being influential in arts which are led by practice. How such literatures become inherent to practice (if they do), and how practices themselves constitute knowledge, are unresolved questions. They are debated at length among arts researchers, even as they try to evaluate the work of each others' doctoral students.

I am writing a first draft of a 90 000-word thesis now. As it stands, it will satisfy about half of Tara Brabazon's conditions. If the criteria for examination are as formal as she suggests, and students are not made aware of them (as is my experience), might not these students have a strong case for appealing unfavourable assessments on the grounds of having suffered a poorly formulated course? Of course they would. However, there are good reasons why, in the end, the criteria hinted at by Brabazon may not be rigorously or uniformly applied:

- i) Doctoral study is a lucrative revenue stream for university departments. No department can afford to fail too many students.
- ii) The integrity of a knowledge field is hard to defend if no-one really agrees on what its vital characteristics are.
- iii) As your previous respondent suggests, plenty of PhDs have little direct bearing on employment. As in the good old days of 'education', they are pursued partly for the purposes of personal growth.

Conclusion: Academic rigor is bound to be 30% actuality, 30% performance, 40% compromise, but that's quite good going.

- **Earnest** 29 January, 2010

The beautiful formatting of my earlier submission was stripped out by the website submission engine! I hereby pre-emptively appeal any critique made on the grounds of paragraph structure.

- **Ed Cayshon** 29 January, 2010

That must be Tip No.12, Earnest: you can't blame the bindery! ;-)

- **Jim T** 29 January, 2010

10 ways not examine a thesis.

1. Behave in a way that is improper.

This story begins by discussing three PhDs Brabazon has recently examined. Three at once. How can that be proper? She implies that 2 out of the 3 are not up to par and are therefore ongoing. Brabazon's use of these poor students as examples in her article is unprofessional and unkind. The TES should not have published this article.

- **jim T** 29 January, 2010

ouch That's me failed! THE I meant.

- **Earnest** 29 January, 2010

...an by 'performance' I meant 'a dedication to academic rigor can be performed; it can be part of an examiner's performance, whether or not it is grounded in formalised knowledges'... phew!... concision can turn out to be such a bummer!

- **Martin** 30 January, 2010

I'm one of those poor 19-year-old undergraduate students, still eager to make generalizations and accessorize them with 'Kent footnotes'. But before doing that I would like to ask if it is appropriate to respond that I was 'lmao' while reading this issue. Hurrah for the highly entertaining writing!

The content however, appeals to me as questionable in originality. I will keep the generalizations for another time and use only personal experience here: in my 'Introduction to Academe' course (at University College Maastricht, The Netherlands) I have been trained for a whole semester in writing according to the above mentioned guide lines. Additionally, both G. Woods's "Research Papers for Dummies" and J.E. Aaron's "Little, Brown, Compact Handbook" state all ten points if not in exactly the same words, then at least in very comparable phrasing.

To me, though excellently put, the article states the obvious, but thanks again for writing it down in such a brilliant way. It is still going to be a long one, but at breakfast you have already made my day =)

- **Dr Fed** 30 January, 2010

Pity the student who has this crazy for an examiner.

- **Professor W** 30 January, 2010

I pity any student who has the misfortune of encountering any of these bitter, unpleasant, pompous posters.

- **Gwen** 30 January, 2010

The sentence about PhDs having no connection with everyday modes of communication makes me wince with embarrassment.

I can see by Professor Brabazon's photograph she is not an old lady. But what's with the Barbara Woodhouse act?

There are no hard and fast rules for how a thesis should be written, although institution or supervisors may offer some guidelines, and there are boxes that must be ticked in terms of method and approach. Preference varies in disciplines, but it can't be allowed to boil down to the individual taste of the examiner.

Many PhD students are now choosing to publish their tomes online 'as-is' with a good deal of success and with readership that extends to the minions gathered on the ground outside Brabazon-Woodhouse's ivory tower. Yes a thesis should be secured in intellectualism, but no, the academe should not assume that it has only one audience in the examiner. A thesis may be written in text speak if it offers a significant contribution to knowledge. We might not like it, we may hate it, but essentially it is the contribution to knowledge that counts, even if it's sent in semaphore.

Remember you are an examiner, not God.

- **David** 30 January, 2010

Don't get it.

So it's really about the bombastic pedantry? Or the spelling errors?

Was gonna copy and paste the Foucaults and Baumans and Jenkins(!) and other sledgehammer-like referential celebratory what-nots into onebighugeword, but then thought not.

That would be, like, more effort than just sitting for the coiffure.

- **Seabie** 30 January, 2010

As a PhD student I would be very interested in this article if it delivered on the title. If my research question were as all-encompassing as this title, and my research so narrowly focussed, then I would expect my supervisors to point out I was overstating my contribution to knowledge. In fact, this is "How not to write a PhD thesis in Media Studies" and half the points have no relevance for my discipline. Though if I tried to submit an artefact I could find myself in a very interesting viva...

- **Neb** 30 January, 2010

Nobody tells you before you get the PhD what you have to do. Well done, Ms. Brabazon.

- **dr richte**a 31 January, 2010

Ms Brabazon's theories about referencing online material is as outdated as her hair and makeup. There are suggestions in her article that she would like to keep the educational underclass subjugated and would discourage the reading or comprehension of PhD thesis by the non academic (see tip 4). I wish the students that have Mr Brabazon as an examiner the best of British, they will jolly well need it.

- **Professor W** 31 January, 2010

Wow, dr richtea, your sexist bitchiness really takes the biscuit.

- **Tabby** 31 January, 2010

Spelling, bibliography, good academic/intellectual craftsmanship.... I think these are perfectly good common-sense points for Ms Brabazon to make. I cannot understand why so many posts seem to be sneering at what are basic facts of academic writing.

- **Jeff** 1 February, 2010

@ Neb - your university or department should be running training sessions to advise on things like writing and structuring your thesis, what to expect in the examination and, if at all possible, giving you an opportunity to undertake a mock examination.

These ideas are embodied in the QAA's "Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education", the first precept of which is: "Institutions will put in place effective arrangements to maintain appropriate academic standards and enhance the quality of postgraduate research programmes". See:

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section1/default.asp>

Any institution failing to support its postgraduate students in this way is not doing its job properly.

- **Technicolour Squirrel** 1 February, 2010

Labouring undering all of these rules is why PhD programs so rarely produce any artists who truly break new ground, despite all of their obsession about originality. I don't think I am really saying anything here that everyone doesn't already know.

Given that the goal of the PhD system really has nothing to do with producing great artists OR original cultural movements, at all, this is not surprising. What is somewhat surprising is how frequently they pretend to do original things, simply because they can't find that thing written in some journal somewhere.

'Do your research', indeed.

It's the artists in the world that discover the points of originality. And they do it the old way, the tried and tested way: by Being Free. The public selects what it wants. This system is way more functionally intelligent than the PhD system, despite the members being not any more or even less intelligent, since it works according the precepts of mutation and selection: i.e. Evolution.

The PhD system is full of selection but so little mutation that every field of inquiry is in constant danger of thinking itself into oblivion.

Did I make any spelling mistakes? Do I care? Should you? Should anyone?

Ask these questions, or what are you even there to do?

- **Jim T** 1 February, 2010

@ Tabby I don't think posts are sneering at what are basic facts of academic writing. The reason why there are so many negative comments is the idea that any examiner who would seek to create a debilitating moment of self-awareness in a candidate is a very unpleasant thought for many people.

@ Jeff I think your input is a useful reminder . Universities have a responsibility to prepare and support students through the examination. However there needs to be an explicit code of conduct for examiners, so that candidates do not fall prey to curmudgeons with bear traps.

- **Steph B** 1 February, 2010

Thank God I read this now rather than two years down the line. It may be common sense but it doesn't hurt to be reminded of these "basic" tips.

- **Stresspuppy** 1 February, 2010

@Tabby, I agree. As with most articles written from one particular viewpoint, there are some points that are relevant to

me and some that are not so relevant. But as Steph B said, it is good to be reminded of the basics occasionally.

I don't understand the bitchiness although I am impressed with Dr Richtea's ability to encompass the terms misogynist, narrow-minded and stereotypical, all in his first sentence. To be honest, he might as well have stopped writing there... I certainly stopped reading there.

- **peter mackie** 1 February, 2010

I think it depends hugely what discipline you are in but at the quantitative end of social science I'd say the following are desirables ; 1) pick a topic which enables you to demonstrate a contribution to knowledge 2) show a strong grasp of relevant theory--recognise that only a small proportion of good theses achieve theoretical advances 3) show an ability in application design and analysis using state of art methods 4) demonstrate understanding of relevance of results to policy or other real world context 5) demonstrate publishability preferably by having already published or submitted 6) write the thesis up in a manner which is fit for purpose and no longer than it needs to be 7) have an open and honest discussion with your supervisor about the merits of various external examiners to examine the thesis 8) discuss what is expected in the viva itself eg don't defend the indefensible, respond positively to good points, emphasise the strengths of your work etc 9) know the possible outcomes eg if there is a minor corrections category to be done in a month, that can be useful. Not many 100000 word docs avoid occasional slips 10) if you really want to get through on the day get a friend to proof read it. Both you and your supervisor may be blind to the typos by that stage.

- **SMR** 1 February, 2010

The first comment is still the best. What possible use could there be in getting a PhD in something so vacuous as "media studies" ?!

- **Sam Wangila** 1 February, 2010

Hey Tara...Your critical appraisal on this topic is quite practical. Three quarters of the issues you raise have been part of what my supervisors comment. It however appears that too good a thesis can also raise problems for the student especially ...For instance especially if you get panelists on your defence who on failing to pin you down on anything decide to take you on some of your proposed recommendations for future research...Do students have any reprieve on this or is it another monkey business of juggling the liver in our hands? Sam - Kenya

- **ToTara Brabazon** 1 February, 2010

You cite these articles to show that you are doing research work?!

- **Adam** 1 February, 2010

hmmm... don't follow half of this advice if you are submitting a PhD in a scientific subject is all I have to say. Off to do some of my own "media studies" and watch Eastenders now.

- **HDK** 2 February, 2010

As an aspiring academic student of ethnic other, it is rather enthralling to read the Euro-centric elitism unfolds in the article. The lesson is, in the institution of whiteness, since every conceivable English word at some point, one would presume, was used by an ethnically White person first, to engage with any sort of discourse one must first honor the pre-conceived and necessary genealogy "pioneered" by those White European guys, preferably French. Well, institution begets institution, even the one with a self-proclaimed purpose to uncover the power structure hidden everywhere else but itself. (Yeah, I know, the audacity of me to even play the race card.)

- **J. I. Hans Bakker** 2 February, 2010

Comment No. 5 on throwing words around when you have not read the relevant authors is right on the mark. I find that graduate students who have never read the authors of Post-Modernist works will nevertheless use the terms relevant to their way of thinking as if those terms can be used completely outside of the original framework. Of course, the popular media throw around words like "deconstruct" and "discourse" as well, when such word as analyze and perspective would do just fine. However, let me even extend the remark to the use of philosophical ideas used by Modernist writers in the arts, humanities, social sciences, behavioral sciences, life sciences, physical sciences, mathematics, statistics and other disciplinary areas. It is very, very important when citing "William of Ockham" or "Immanuel Kant" to have read Ockham or Kant (or, preferably, both!). Yet I constantly find straw man references to the philosophers which are used as a kind of intellectual filler. The author who cites Wittgenstein but who has obviously not read Wittgenstein is an author whose books I will not buy!

- **Andy** 2 February, 2010

A PhD thesis is supposed to demonstrate that the student has developed into an independent researcher and no longer needs spoon-feeding and mothering by their supervisor. In this sense, having an over controlling supervisor hinders the writing of a "good" thesis that demonstrates the student's capabilities. I can only assume that this article is a satire on that important point, great work!

- **Dr J** 2 February, 2010

I wish I had read an article like this during my PhD - not because I think all the points here are essential, or even compelling, but because it wasn't until the last year that it even occurred to me to consider what the actual requirements might be... And that was at Oxbridge!

I *do* think that the width of literature required is a very difficult problem, though - in the technical disciplines we generally assume anything (apart from the key theoretical stuff) older than 10-15 years, i.e. not available online easily) is irrelevant. I wonder how often that's incorrect.

- **FedUp** 3 February, 2010

I think I had a Tara clone for my Viva. Horrible experience - my external was not qualified to examine my thesis and it showed.

People so full of their own self-importance shouldn't be able to get away with virtually destroying their students. Another thing, I think the academic judgment of an external examiner should be a ground for appeal - so there!

- **Sid** 3 February, 2010

Have to say my viva was alright and so was my thesis. Attention to detail saved my bacon. You have to generate research above and beyond the initial requirements of your PhD.

Total PhD Publications

Supervised Publications: 6, impact factor 3-4

Unsupervised Publications: 3, Impact factor 8-9

The latter is critical as the examiner will assume you have been spoon feed during the course of your PhD irrespective of your Uni

- **Mighty Thor** 3 February, 2010

Cue the Pink Floyd. Ten more bricks in the wall.

- **John Shelley** 3 February, 2010

Having recently embarked on a PhD I feel Tara's 10 points will provide me with an invaluable framework over the next three years. As Sid mentioned, you have to be able to generate research "above and beyond" the requirements to ensure you maintain a high standard. So many thanks to Tara... and don't listen to Dr Richtea, I like your hair!

- **Dr Richtea** 3 February, 2010

Dear Stresspuppy you have clearly demonstrated your own ability to stereotype by assuming that i am a 'him'. Bitchy yes, misogynistic no.

- **Tom Johnstone** 3 February, 2010

Can I add one for science-based PhDs?:

Don't write your thesis as a series of published or ready-for-submission journal articles. Instead, spend all your time writing a monolithic thesis in a format that bears little resemblance to published journal articles. This will frustrate your examiners and also require you to completely rewrite everything for publication during the first years of your postdoc (assuming you're lucky enough to get a postdoc with no publications to your name).

- **Syarwan Ahmad** 3 February, 2010

I think that it is a good idea for not to write Phd thesis. Phd students had better take courses of his or her field to make him or her more knowledgeable of his or her field. Too many students have problem writing their Phd thesis. The problem is derived from many sources like professors, students themselves, lack of sources, time management, financial constraints and others. In short, the failure of Phd students is, more often than not, a consequence of many variables that have nothing to do with academic capability. Some people say that academic writing is different from other

writings. Unfortunately, most universities do not have special standard of academic writing. Assigning several courses in their field is better than assigning thesis. Thesis commonly discusses one topic that does ensure the maturity of the candidate. In some cases, just a waste of time and age. Getting them to write a journal article that is readable and feasibly published is better, I think. Syarwan Ahmad (Phd student of Faculty of Education, UM Malaysia

- **Marginally disgusted from Tunbridge Wells** 4 February, 2010

I've read many abstracts and never seen this phrase included: "My original contribution to knowledge is..."

It's a little trite.

- **rjm** 4 February, 2010

I've recently had my thesis sent back for major corrections, despite reading numerous articles and books containing advice like this and obeying their injunctions. One criticism was that I had an 'inappropriate tone' to my writing. No details were furnished by my examiners as to what was 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate'. The same goes for the conclusion, which my examiner described as 'particularly poor' without giving any supporting statement to justify this sweeping statement. My concluding chapter, incidentally, was clearly neither 'short' nor 'rushed'. On the basis of this evidence I venture the scientific conclusion that my examiners were both arrogant and incompetent and are probably behaving in an unlawful manner.

If a cop seized you on the street, took you to the station and put you in the cell for a week, and when you demanded a reason for this behaviour, he was unable to cite a law either you had broken or one he was implementing, a successful civil action would certainly result. The same should go for failed/rejected doctoral candidates until proper objective grounds for pass and failing of five years of 'life' are established i.e. basic transparency. Naturally, I'm prepared to conduct a practical experiment on this question. Most university statutes define a doctorate as 'an substantial original contribution to knowledge or understanding at doctorate level', or something of that order, with very little to say about 'tone' or length of conclusion etc, which in any case must surely vary from subject to subject.

In the event of a second negative result, I and my lawyer will be issuing court summonses left, right and centre to help the university and the examiners see the error of their ways through litigious assaults on their bank accounts. Until I can find some evidence of objective criteria, I will assume I have been subject to arbitrary treatment and 'disfavouritism' of the type that would bring about a legal challenge to the result of a beauty contest. No-one should tolerate five years of their lives and thousands of their pounds being wasted on a process presided over by somebody who could be drunk or insane, and which usually take place behind closed doors. The self-centred conceit of some examiners thoroughly deserves to be challenged: the idea that they are accountable to nobody but themselves and the idea that the attitude that they can do what they like needs to be put to an end. They are performing an important public function and there needs to be convincing proof that they are acting fairly.

The real secret for passing a doctorate in my possibly bitter experience is: conform and don't cause trouble. Don't even think of it. Don't try to say something new, try to show brilliance, provoke or try to change the minds or your elders and betters. Don't question the established authorities or point to weaknesses in their work, no matter how obvious these have become. Don't go off the beaten track in the search for new knowledge, or try to tell it like it is, or appears to be. Accept the dogmas of the subject, however ridiculous and outdated. Don't acquire a writing style or verbal debating skills that are more persuasive those that of your examiners or supervisors. Don't be more prolific in your output than them. It makes them look stupid. Don't give them any grounds for seeing you as a threat or a rival. Be prepared to compromise at the expense of your own honesty for the greater glory of ther aforementioned persons. Don't stand your ground too much in relation to criticism. Your 'original contribution' should be modest, more modest than their's. Don't bombard the poor dears with too much information that indicates you might be right in your disagreements with them. Please, please don't allow your natural disposition to be a clever sod to show or show too much personality: be a 'grey blur'. Don't be confident: many academics see this as a sign of stupidity. Allow your superiors to get on top of you and reduce you to a nervous wreck with their criticism: its what they went through as doctoral candidates, and they will resent it if you don't feel the same.

Best of luck...

- **Independent Academic** 4 February, 2010

rjm: What law do you suppose the examiners have broken by sending back your thesis for major corrections?

- **Entropozoidicus** 4 February, 2010

Media studies.....

Not Guattari but Deleuze.....
 Obviously this woman hasn't a clue.
 I give it. Media studies, business studies.... naff.

- **Khruschev** 4 February, 2010

@rjm, as a very experienced PhD supervisor, I can only say how right you are. The proliferation of doctorates has also led to a proliferation of those who think they are now licensed to trash other peoples' work, whether at PhD or in peer-review process. It is all-too-frequently juvenile, based on self-interest and their own (often limited) ability to understand what you have achieved. Appeal. If you look in your handbook long enough and collect enough evidence about the examiners you will almost certainly find grounds. When I get examiners like this, I insist they be specific about what you have to do to pass, and if I am chairing the event, don't let them out of the room until they have done so. And don't listen to your supervisor who will have kittens at the thought of an appeal. Sometimes you have to rip what is yours out of their hands.

- **Fedup** 4 February, 2010

Rjm: Brings me to my point that the academic judgement of examiners SHOULD be a grounds for appeal. They get away with what they want (I almost think a viva outcome is dependent on what mood they're in on that day!) without having to account for it. Poor show and a travesty for the person who is left in the s**t.

- **newbie** 4 February, 2010

Interestingly my supervisor made an encouraging, and informal comment when we last chatted over coffee about the challenge of the PhD process. It was something like, "your thesis is your first step as an academic researcher, if its the best piece of work you ever do then you are a clearly a crap academic". So far the process has been very difficult, at the same time rewarding...thank-fully Im surrounded by people who want me to succeed on my own terms rather than theirs.

- **David** 5 February, 2010

My tip number 11 to PhD students everywhere, is simply to relax and realise that your expectations of what is required for a PhD are likely to be much higher than your examiners. I (somehow) managed to pass mine with no corrections, but I spent 10 months over the allotted 3 years, ironing out every conceivable flaw I, and my supervisor, could think of. It would have been better in retrospect to just send it out earlier and do the corrections afterwards.

- **Jeff** 5 February, 2010

It's not just PhD examiners that are self-obsessed - go to any conference (if you can bear it) and wait until the Q&A session where there will be at least three individuals who will say something like "well, that's all very interesting, but have you seen my work on..."

I happen to think this is a very useful guideline for anyone involved in a PhD, although one suspects that the supervisor for any PhD should really be on top of all of these issues. It's not like there are many PhD candidates with experience of writing PhD's.

- **Silent Minority** 5 February, 2010

@rjm

It is possible that the examiners have valid points to make about your thesis. You might find it more productive to simply ask them to provide you with more detailed feedback about what corrections are necessary.

- **artad** 5 February, 2010

My experience as a student, supervisor and an academic, is that invariably it is the examiner that is blamed for a thesis that requires major corrections. Examiners are incompetent: they do not understand; they are blind to innovation; they are opposed to sophistication; they cannot read, or listen, or take notice; they are consumed with envy or indifference; in the viva they are determined to puff themselves up; display monstrous egos; deny other opportunities to speak, be heard, oppose their views. And so on, and so on. There are two sides to every story. Most examiners are decent people doing an honest job. They devote several weekends to reading your thesis (no time to do this at work). They travel cattle class to your useless third rate university where the department is too cheap to provide more than a stale sandwich, and your head of department greets them (if at all) with barely concealed contempt, and then they do their best to give you a decent viva, be helpful and supportive, and then at the end of it all, it's quite possible that everyone

will **** off and leave them on some grim stalinist railway station without even offering to buy them a drink. In the midst of all of this they will try to help you. Most theses are actually quite good and major revisions are rare. Of the PhDs that I have examined in the last 15 years I have passed 4 without revisions, asked for minor (within 6 months) revisions on 11, asked for major (within 12 months) revisions on 4 failed one outright, and passed one as an MPhil only. That looks to me pretty close to a statistically normal distribution. If you had to make major revisions to your PhD, it probably needed them. Get a life.

- **Disgusted** 5 February, 2010

@artad I'm sorry, but did you just tell someone who has major corrections to do on their thesis to 'get a life' ? * almost faints*

What a horrible, horrible, thing to say.

They can't get a life because it's been put on hold for another year or more pandering to someone else's wishes.

The tone of your comments suggest you seriously do not enjoy marking PhDs. Rather than carry around this contempt for '3rd rate universities' who don't do the sandwiches you like, it would be better for all involved if you just said no in the first place.

People like you should be ashamed and get a different job! The point of the PhD examination is not about the examiners feelings and whether or not you have a jolly day out.

You have highlighted exactly the irrational unkind attitude students have to deal with.

- **Stella** 5 February, 2010

They travel cattle class to your useless third rate university where the department is too cheap to provide more than a stale sandwich, and your head of department greets them (if at all) with barely concealed contempt, and then they do their best to give you a decent viva, be helpful and supportive, and then at the end of it all, it's quite possible that everyone will **** off and leave them on some grim stalinist railway station without even offering to buy them a drink.>>>>>..

If this is their attitude, I can't see how anyone benefits from their appointment as external examiner.

- **K340** 5 February, 2010

So, @Stella and @Disgusted. I've just examined a dissertation thats poorly put together and badly argued. It's full of errors, some very serious. Some of those serious errors could have led to patient safety being compromised. So, should I have failed it, or ask for major revisions? I'd like to know. In the latter case, the student can just get on with their lives. In the other, they can 'pander to my wishes'. And, as for you Artad, I've examined in Birmingham too. Cheer up!

- **Berg** 5 February, 2010

"Most theses are quite good and major revisions are rare." Is about right. I though Artad was talking about Preston.

- **David** 6 February, 2010

@Berg - Artad can't have been talking about Preston, their railway station is actually quite nice (dilapidated Victorian, rather than grim Stalinist).

- **PhD student** 6 February, 2010

Am I wasting my time doing a Doctorate that can be trashed in few minutes? So sad...

- **PhD Supervisor** 6 February, 2010

Some of Tara's submissions are wrong and misleading. I have read a lot of good PhD theses' abstracts but I have never seen "My original contribution to knowledge is.." This is not even a good phrase to make in a thesis in UK Universities. British use "third person" and not "first person" in academic writings. It is Americans who use "first person" like I and WE. Also Tara appears to be using "references" and "bibliography" interchangeably but they are completely different. Bibliography refers to the works of people one has read and which help to shape one's ideas but which have not been specically cited in-text. References are those that have been cited in-text. Thus, Tara, the professor of media studies needs to get this right!

- **Jeff** 6 February, 2010

@ PhD Supervisor - a number of people have pointed out that one of the problems with Tara's article is the sweeping generalisations she makes, assuming that the conventions in her field reflect the norms in other disciplines. This error is now being propagated by those commenting on the article. To suggest that the "British use third person....Americans...use first person" is so sweeping a statement as to be just wrong! To cite one example: Nature, a British journal, allows its authors to use first or third person at their own discretion. Nationalistic trends may be present in particular subject areas (your own perhaps?), but please don't assume that they apply across all disciplines.

- **Student too!** 6 February, 2010

I want to know why would a student get 'major corrections' status, while he/ she is being supervised? Who should be blamed? Supervisors are getting paid for supervising students, so it is part of their job to 'correctly direct' students throughout the journey!!

- **@ Student too** 6 February, 2010

...students often get major revisions because they do not take the advice of their supervisors. Many first PhD thesis submissions are sloppy in presentation (which in itself would usually only require amendments rather than revisions) -- but the issue here is about the level of the qualification: a PhD is the highest level of academic qualification and as such work submitted for achieving it should be of the highest possible calibre. Where 'contribution to knowledge' is often debatable, presentation of work is not (it's either accurate and cleanly presented or it isn't). As to the debatable issue of 'original contribution', one of the criteria for success in achieving the PhD is that the work must "satisfy the examiners", and whilst there is no doubt that there will be examiners with their own axes to grind, the whole system of PhD examination depends upon the principle of defending your work adequately in what is effectively a form of peer review -- and for the most part it works well. Assuming of course that the work is good enough.

- **amlbovered?** 6 February, 2010

Interesting article and even more interesting comments. As a first year PhDer I'm glad of this article as it highlights the importance of the role of the Supervisor. What if you have two supervisors who (in the scientific field) are not experienced as PhD supervisors, and furthermore, and worse, have no appreciation for the student who is able to "think out of the box", nor scholarly thinking in any peripheral area outside of pure science, i.e., social stuff. Sometimes the two fields intertwine; a relatively new and undiscovered field. Now, you're never going to get supervisors who know both fields, which means what will happen when you come to finding an examiner? If it is new knowledge then surely nobody every knows everything, but my experience is they try to keep you in a harrow, comfortable path which doesn't take the supervisor out of his/her comfort zone. I've clipped my own scholarly wings because I know if I don't someone will clip them for me and I may face the possibility of wasting several years of my life. It figures then that you have to keep within some constraints (even at the expense of downsizing your original idea/thought/theory) if you are to satisfy "rules" and not harm your relationship with the Supervisor (or examiner). I decided I'll leave the "out of the box" thoughts for after I gain my PhD...

- **Mike** 6 February, 2010

@ Student too. It is part of the supervisor's job to supervise. This is not direction, or doing all the work. The degree of PhD or MD is intended to show that the candidate is able to, independently, do research and writing at a very high level. Crucially it is also a license to supervise other PhD students. So it does have to be very good, and it does have to be performed independently.

- **amlbovered?** 6 February, 2010

PS I'm glad Tara published this article (and took the time and effort to write it) as these are things your academic department and supervisors should be telling you, but very often don't. Thank you Tara.

- **Student too** 6 February, 2010

@Milke. You're saying that supervisor's job is to supervise, so can you or anyone please define this word 'supervise' and how it is NOT related to submitting the final work 'correctly' without 'major revisions'?

- **hybrid** 6 February, 2010

The problem is that students are independent. They're not obliged to follow supervisors' guidance and sometimes they don't. An MD student of mine decided to ignore my (written) advice, was trashed in the Viva, and spent the next year being very cross with me for not supervising him properly.

- **Discourse and Deconstruction** 6 February, 2010

I would just like to defend the specific use of terms like discourse and deconstruct-criticized in an earlier post. It is too simplistic to suggest these are interchangeable with analyze and perspective-although there is nothing to stop them being badly used in this way. While deconstruction is a term that is consistently abused, it points to a a set of approaches to analysis. It would be more helpful to say that a text of film is analyzed using a deconstructive approach and hopefully specify which deconstructive thinker tis being used to do this..

Discourse can not be exchanged with perspective and varies according to the perspective brought to it. For me, discourse is understood in Foucault's sense, that is language plus power equals knowledge and is expressed in the micro-statements that make up a discursive regime. When I do discourse analysis I am reading for the way texts name legitimate and illegitimate knowing and in relation to what and whom. However, when one of my colleagues, a clinical psychologist, says discourse analysis, he means the word for word recording and transcription of an oral interview which will then be analyzed within the clinical perspective he is using. Power/knowledgeI won't come in to this at all

These may be illegitimate comments in this forum as I gave up my Phd research in despair over the discursive conflicts between what I was trying to articulate and the impossibility of framing it within the epistemological assumptions embedded n the the stylistic perimeters of a doctoral thesis!. However, I agree with the view on the poverty of research that simply cites rather than reads. Perhaps what is needed is a requirement for Phd students to give some exposition of the terms they are using and specify their context rather than assume shared meanings? This would seem particularly important in cross disciplinary and interdisciplinary work.

Warm Regards
Ruth Chandler

- **khb** 6 February, 2010

What happens to those students who use collaborative works by Deleuze and Guattari?

- **deleuze and guattari-collaborations** 6 February, 2010

Well I guess Deleuze and Guattari might say something along the lines that the trick is to make a concept jump assemblage, e.g discover the degree zero of a system of thought and depart through it, taking the assemblage beyond its threshold state and re-assembling in a new configuration. Now that's innovative....but I can see it going down like a lead balloon in the viva as well as being extremely hard to do rather than just say- Its not just a question of decomposing a system of thought but also recomposing it in a plane of conceptual consistency that works I've been involved in theoretical and performance based research collaborations premised on doing precisely this but extremely difficult to express in more conventional narrative formats. None of this abdicates the need to be specific about the context of expression for a term though and demonstrate expertise about this in the chosen sphere. Otherwise, all one is doing is vacuous renaming. There is a lot of this around but it makes dull reading. At the same time, I have seen no ways of assessing how far a student moves from writing on to writing out of specific theoretical understandings at doctoral level. Sigh! R

- **And** 6 February, 2010

To add to the above, I think Tara is right to expect students to be affirm the generosity of past thinkers by either making the effort to read them entire or where the research is a topic occupying many thinkers, reading the widest range of perspectives on a given topic. Either do that or scale down the research topic. Due modesty about the scale and importance of a research contribution also good sense. Nietzsche talks about two forms of superficiality, the first borne out impoverishment, of not having enough to say, reducing everything else to this level and a second borne out of plenitude, forcing a rigorous selection. Tara seems to be advocating something similar and I cannot disagree.

Where I find the article over-determined is on how far the 'given subject' of empirical enquiry (aka the transcendental subject) informs the written format of a media PHD.This production of specified intellectuals through this disciplinary matrix, sees to me at odds with the theoretical interests of the writer. If, to use a famous sound bite, the end of the book is the beginning of writing, can we think beyond the book in PHD style? What other modes of expression would demonstrate sufficient expertise and comparable rigour? This would be a great research project in its own right but way too big for me.

Any takers?

R

- **Possetive** 8 February, 2010

Thank you.

- **@K340** 11 February, 2010

"And, as for you Artad, I've examined in Birmingham too. Cheer up!"

Thanks for making me LOL in the office, despite the fact that I actually work at a Brum uni. Must have been the other uni, because as far as I know, we always dish out drink and nosh for work done well.

As for the article, I found most of Tara's remarks interesting, if not for my own project. But I do agree - correct spelling and proper referencing is something we require of our undergraduates, so there's really no excuse at PG level.

- **mary** 11 February, 2010

I do not like her at all, but her text (and maybe her make up too) is a good awareness of how terrible could be to choose a bad supervisor.

- **Viva coming up soonish** 11 February, 2010

I think some of the points made in the original article are informative, but others are not so useful to those of us doing natural science PhDs. If there's anyone with experience in examining science theses I for one would appreciate just a few pointers. Thanks!

- **Contrarian** 12 February, 2010

Universities charge high fees and receive further riches from HEFCE for each research student, but often give too little in return. It isn't Professor Brabazon's job to correct spelling, it is her job to tell the student about deficiencies in the thesis. If a thesis fails because the student didn't follow the guidance of the supervisors, that's fine, but if a student follows all the guidance of the supervisors and fails, something is wrong. Did the supervisors select an appropriate examiner? Would the supervisors know? If the supervisors select an examiner with an approach to the subject matter fundamentally at variance to their own, what chance has the student got? The purpose is to come up with an original contribution, but it is mainly methodology that is examined and methodology can be failed for pedantic or self-important reasons. The student is training to be an academic, but in order to get through it has to earn money for food by teaching the undergraduates that their supervisors can't be bothered to teach, often doing it better than their supervisors would have done. Universities get away with murder in their treatment of research students, and yet without research students no university would be able to operate. Few supervisors have ever been trained how to supervise and many lack the people skills they would need in order to be good at it. Physician heal thyself.

- **Mike Kilne** 13 February, 2010

An interesting article and an equally interesting set of comments following it.

I'll share some of my own experience re: my PhD research, write up and subsequent Viva. I spent a little over three years studying insect exoskeletal proteins (yawn to most people ;0) and got a couple of publications from it. I wrote up my thesis with general introduction, methods, the papers bound in (as per Grad school rules), additional results chapters and general discussion etc. My supervisor said it was great apart from a few typos and formatting of some tables, so I made the changes and submitted. After three months, we hadn't heard anything from the external re: organising a Viva date, so my supervisor gave her a polite phone call to check if every thing was OK. The external got funny and told said supervisor that she hadn't read it yet and she would be in contact in due course. Come the day of the Viva (3 months later), I was directly asked why I hadn't referenced my external [answer: substantially different field] [reply: I'm sure that other people would have found a reason to do so]. I was then told to remove my 'figures and tables' contents page, to which I replied that the grad school rules obliged me to have one [reply: well I want it removed anyway]. External then asked about a set of genes I had covered in the introduction and asked why I hadn't compared them to plant genes of the same name. I thought it was an easy mistake for her to make, as although the plant genes had the same gene symbols they are unrelated and perform a completely different function (and although the short names are the same, the full names are different) and I explained this (thinking that she may have been asking a trick question). Apparently, you shouldn't correct your examiners knowledge because icy stares ensue and instructions that I had to add an entire section in my introduction on genes which had no relevance to my work in an organism which again had no relevance to my field of study [my supervisor was livid when he heard this, but informed me 'write the section or she will fail you']. When we arrived at the results chapters I was asked why my thesis contained bound papers. I explained that I was the first author on both papers, that my supervisor was the second author and that I had conducted all the research and analysis. I was told that that was obvious but that the examiner considered it was 'self-plagerism'. Luckily I had the grad school rules with me and could show that published work should be bound together with a statement that the work was

substantially my own. Again I was told that basically she didn't care and that I had to re-write both papers as chapters and to make sure the text wasn't similar or I would be failed. To be fair she also spotted three or four typos and a line which had been duplicated and I was more than happy to make these changes; but when one can be failed for following the graduate school rules, for not writing sections on areas unrelated to your work and for being lucky enough to have papers published the 'you cannot challenge academic judgement' rule seems a rather cruel mechanism for saying 'tough, we can do and say what we like and who are you to challenge us with logic or grad school instructions?'

- **PGR** 15 February, 2010

As a PhD student awaiting for my viva I found the article really helpful as it reassured me that I have done all the right things and that my supervisor knows a great deal about how to write a good thesis. I don't understand the negative comments though.

- **rjm** 16 February, 2010

Whilst its a little late, here's a reply to some of those who questioned my earlier post.

As to the law - well I never suggested that they have committed a crime, but it occurs to me that a judge may be sympathetic to a civil action compensating me for lost earnings etc, if it can be shown that my examiners have not given me fair treatment. By this I mean that if it could be demonstrated that one of them had not read the great majority of my thesis, or that some of the comments were simply attempts at politically-motivated censorship or the suppression of fair criticism of the work of others. Equally I could go breach of contract in so far as the supervisor did not find appropriate examiners in the event of a failure, which is admittedly now unlikely. In the case of an MPhil being awarded, these considerations will be mentioned in my appeal. However I admit this is a legal question to be dealt with not by me - can any lawyers here venture an opinion on my chances? And its very much a worse-case scenario.

To examiners and their friends on the board who complain at my attitude, I would simply urge them at very least to learn how to cover your own arses in relation to this kind of situation. Doing the job thoroughly, referring to the text in detail, not making allegation unsupported by reference to the text, clearly delineating fact and opinion and so on, prevents this type of situation emerging. Its good academic practice in general and greatly helps candidates such as myself to make corrections where necessary. I too have worked in education, and it is certainly true that pupils make unfair and false allegations against the teacher. But a good one knows that they shouldn't make themselves a target for this by acting unprofessionally or giving the troublemakers the excuse, as it were. In many ways, I can't but feel contempt for my examiners for not covering this angle. Fortunately for them, I am not malicious or lazy and I don't want to see them sacked, I just want my DPhil. And possibly act with a little more dignity next time they take a v.v.

As to the point about asking for more questions of my worthy examiners, please be assured that I wanted to do this but, you see, at the viva, when I tried to clarify matters, the poor things 'had a train to catch', a train which followed the exposure of a serious area of ignorance in one of the examiners. Having challenged my bibliography, he could not name a single authority I had left out! Train catching time indeed, I chuckled to myself at the time. The university regulations actually prevent me from contacting these runaways until after the second examination.

As for the person who urged we major correction-ites to move on and get a life, well I can promise this character that my corrections had already been completed when I made my comments. Yes there have been improvements. This said, if I redid my work five more times there would hope for there to be five more levels of improvement. I'm not so conceited as to believe that my submission was perfect or that any one can be. The problem is that I now await a second judgement from precisely the same dubious pair as last time, a situation which does not fill me with delight. Being criticised, or even treated unfairly on one occasion is not the end of the world, but should it recur, most sensible people would want to do something about it.

More generally, I wish to draw attention to the complete unaccountability of examiners as a matter of principle. There seems to be no safeguard against arbitrary behaviour or the intervention of vested interests - my examiners were particularly offended by my exposure of dishonesty, up to and including plagiarism in the secondary literature. Close to the knuckle on my part, I admit, but is this really good reason for 'revise and resubmit'? And what of this 'academic freedom' I've been hearing so much about lately? Let me be honest - I've removed many critical arguments and exposures from my original submission in the hope of appeasing my examiners. It goes without saying I'll hang on the earlier version...

Good luck to one and all in their research....

- **John F.** 16 February, 2010

Good article, Tara. I just escaped out of a PhD which ran to a princely 156,000 words - I can tell you would have loved it :-) I'm also a qualified secondary teacher and I'm wondering do any secondary schools give a bonus for having a PhD (in my case in history) or is there any bonus at all for having it as a secondary school teacher?

I'm just recovering from a "footnote every sentence" mentality. I need a holiday now! ;-)

- **Ian Henderson** 16 March, 2010

hi tara,!!! fanx d 4 d info lol!!! I fink dat itz reely gud d way d@ u deconstruct dis stuff 4 uz students!!! i reed loads meself u no! i fik d@ ur discourse is ded structuralised (i no all abowt dis coz i do it at mi uni but i fink d@ sum ov dem chat rubbish) i dont no nuffin sometimes i fink i'm a bit 2 postmodern if u no wot i mean!!!!!! ne way.

- **LSH** 28 June, 2010

I don't understand why many of these comments are so flippant. I'm about to enter this world and am petrified. What Tara offers is some reassurance and help, for which I am grateful. So, why the attitude?

- **James** 7 July, 2010

I'm at the end of writing my PhD thesis for neuroscience and apart from the fact that the article author does a terrible job of generalising outside of their own field, there are several reasons to make flippant remarks (response to LSH).

Mainly, nobody who does a PhD has any idea of what is expected from the thesis. In my department alone some people have no corrections offered by their supervisor and others have mountains yet this has absolutely no bearing on the quality of the writing or what the external examiner (or internal) will say of it. There is no common way of examining a PhD thesis, even in the same field and so an equal number of boffins and not-so-bright people both slip through the net or get stuck without funding for months on end.

Supervisors are the problem because they don't all adopt any kind of system for checking PhD theses whatsoever. In my opinion, the same number of people (but not necessarily the exact same people) would pass or fail their PhDs without a supervisor at the end. The examiners decide all.

ie - leave the country and block your emails when writing up.

- **Arturas** 17 July, 2010

I just wonder (I haven't read all of the text here but..) why do we need to have a phd to be experts in our field? is it always the case of trying to get new status ? or we want to progress to teaching?

I think with the majority of people : if we are interested in a subject we will achieve our phds in our heads rather that through an institution. We need phds because of the support given from our fellow academics, but.. do we actually use this support that often ? I think that in these times phds to some people are becoming a standard ...just like getting a BA. do we really want to thicken the water this way ? of course not .. at least i do not, I think even without the status of a doctor ... I can get the knowledge worthy of one . Love Tara ! she is amazing!

- **Tiffany** 11 August, 2010

@rjm - I'm about to embark on the world of phd-ism and hope that my new supervisor will offer me guidance and support, because I didn't get a great deal from my MA supervisor. She offered tutorials when I was working (even though she was aware I work full-time and study part-time) we only managed one tutorial; would not meet me before the evening classes that were held at the Uni where she worked, and she only commented on 1 chapter of my dissertation. Thank you for your contribution to this discussion, it livened things up.

- **Phd lackey** 11 August, 2010

Don't write.

- **helen** 3 October, 2010

This is helpful. I'm writing my own thesis and I begin to realise why my fussy supervisor keeps making me revise stuff she liked when she first saw it. Maybe I won't throttle her with my bare hands and flee the country after all! [Joke, OK?]

I have seen what happens when supervisors don't give their students a hard time during preparation. It's a complete misery to have to do major revisions post examination and an extra 18 months is realistic. It doesn't tell you about the

sense of failure and humiliation that goes with it though. Not to mention all those extra fees to pay! And having your career on hold while your contemporaries are doing exciting new jobs.

Part of the problem is that you get so tired. No hols for 3 years, no weekends for a year, constant work. And this is a project that's gone fairly well. Seems to me that A levels and first degrees are very accessible, when so many students seem to get a A*s all the way and there are so many Firsts. PhDs are HARD.

- **Sly** 3 October, 2010

Thanks Tara. @ others why the attitude.

- **Samiya** 5 September, 2011

Very useful article. I am glad I read your article. I want to pursue a PhD in Human Resources my self. I am working on my topic. I am sure these 10 points are life savers for me.

I hope my topic gets selected and I get to work under an experienced supervisor like yourself.

- **'Funmi** 21 September, 2011

Thanks Tara for the advice. I start a PhD next month. I am having second thoughts about having the word 'discourse' from my title...

- **shanshuprophecy** 14 October, 2011

I think the article is great but I am stunned by some of the comments aimed at Tara's hair/makeup and also discipline. Do those of you who commented on media studies as vacuous & lightweight have the faintest idea about the discipline? I mean really understand it? The comment that 'doing' media studies entails 'watching an episode of Eastenders' makes me think not.

Many comments are like 'h8r' threads found on social networking sites - I am stunned that academics and postgrad students have responded with such personal and/or straight-up rude comments.

I used to be associated with a university where Tara worked - she was not only a highly sought-after PhD supervisor (she couldn't fit me in) but her students always loved her. She was also popular and dynamic lecturer.

I find her writing witty and entertaining, it's not always to my liking but it is always provocative (the comments section here illustrates this). But, even if I didn't like what she wrote, or agree with her argument, I would never berate, belittle or outright sneer & I am at a loss to understand why others have responded in this way.

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- **Angelique** 14 November, 2011

Thanks, Tara. I wish i had seen this article when it first appeared, rather than now, when i have about 10 months left to finish my thesis. You seem to have pointed out several things that I have not done right. For a start, there is a thesis plan on my desk in front of me right now with the words 'My thesis will deconstruct...' in it. I know now that the word is 'analyze'.

- **Jesus Christ (aka Superstar)** 23 November, 2011

How sad that public money is spent on the salaries of people who openly say: 'A doctorate may be described in many ways, but it has no connection with everyday modes of communication.'

Which proves the shallowness of many academics nowadays, who have orgasms counting typos and publish ten useless articles a year because they are judged by 'productivity' criteria but not substance.

To be a good researcher and supervisor you need first of all the joy of sharing what you know with students, not enjoying the pleasure of discovering what they DO NOT know and pointing it out during the probably most important examination of their lives. What most average lecturers have is just a lot of frustration that they vomit on students. just as simple as that.

Your attitude is truly depressing and somehow outrageous and has absolutely nothing to do with knowledge. True knowledge is not in academia, which is just a system where some disciplined mechanical minded individuals show their ability to read and synthesise and recycle other people's ideas who were, in the beginning usually adversed and labelled as 'bullshit' or 'fluff'. When they die, they usually become the Bible and these factory workers (sorry factory workers) assemble their fluff mixing with a bit of fashionable theory.

Go home. I hope you retire soon, for the benefit of students

- **Demoralised and Depressed** 27 November, 2011

I am 3 years and 2 months into a PhD, and onto my third draft of the thesis which I had hoped to be done by Christmas. I am finding this stage particularly difficult since ALL you ever get is criticism. The only complement you ever get is when a string of pages have no comments at all; not "nice work" or "nicely explained " ... just nothing.

It is so demoralising and depressing as you also feel that every time you jump through a hoop and think you are at the finishing line - it gets pushed further back. I just wonder when it will all end. Maybe when I literally kiss the ground people walk on just to fulfil their pathetic ego.

I really got into academia for the right reasons, but feel I will leave for the right reasons too. Because I have a life!

- **knackered academic** 27 November, 2011

Thanks Tara, some useful insights here despite the bitter brigade. You have to wonder at posters like Jesus Christ and Technicolour Squirrel. On wonders why these Masters of the Universe bother to post on this thread given they have such a superior grasp on knowledge and art production.

- **Ann** 20 December, 2011

I am a bit taken aback by the lack of generosity of some of the comments above - Tara has clearly produced a piece intended to be of help - it is neither vitriolic (as some of the responses are) nor viscious (again - which some responses are). I have been in the room with professors who are giving advice to doctoral candidates who have siad much less kind things - one indicated that it is possible to ascertain the degree of engagement with awork based on the coffee and wine stains it contains - that has never left me! While not all academics and students will agree with what Tara has said, and although at times it appears contradictory there is some useful advice there - take from it what you can use and leave the rest for others.

- **Xuelian nena Jin** 11 January, 2012

I am a second year phd student. It is encouraging to read so many positive comments. At least, we should be sure that a dissertation that costs our three-year life or more is something instead of nothing in the eyes of examiners.

- **Linden- a very tired academic.** 10 May, 2012

Tara - thank you for your clarity. I have been researching and writing my PhD for over 6 years and I am still agonizing over the introduction and conclusion, which I feared may be too long. As you can see - my PhD has not been hastily cobbled together, but that doesn't make the task of finishing any easier. Your insights and comments will hopefully help me, you have certainly armed me for the examiners.

- **Diane** 24 May, 2012

The author of this piece did everyone a favour by exposing her experience-based perspective on the thesis process. Surely airing perspectives is much better than perpetuating the unecessary and stifling mystique. However, will anyone want to do that if they are then subjected to attacks designed to score cheap points about the writer's hair and make-up,

their country of origin and on the reputation of the academic discipline in which they operate? By all means take issue with someone's argument but resist the temptation to shoot the messenger just to score cheap points on a blog. Some of the responses on this site are reprehensible and if those people are PhD candidates shame on them.

- **Oshinowo A. Michael** 27 May, 2012

Totally in support of Ann & Diane. Pick what u need & interpret it to ur own advantage. Tara was only trying to be of help.

- **Henro** 10 June, 2012

The PhD is not for everyone. If its that easy every Tom, Dick and Harry will be a PhD holder. You are training to become an academic and an independent researcher, so you are expected to demonstrate a high level of academic competence required of a would-be PhD. Its not a matter of sentiment. Not doubting the fact that some examiners could show over-bearing attitude during viva examinations, it is highly unlikely that an examiner would fail a candidate that has demonstrated sufficient knowledge and mastery of his/her research area. Such examiners need spiritual deliverance and they should repent and turn away from their wicked ways. It is not too late. And about the writer of this article, I would say, 'good job' Tara.

- **Wayne** 22 June, 2012

So the PhD process is just like the real world: - The boss is not always right but he/she is still the boss. Just suck it in princesses

- **RSA Chief** 25 June, 2012

"...because they do not know enough to know how little they know."

..."They leave themselves vulnerable to an examiner who knows their ideological state apparatuses from their repressive state apparatuses"...

Are you in the matrix or what?

Btw (yes, im a web 2.0 researcher), do you supervise only female PhDs?

- **LaBoheme** 2 July, 2012

My PhD fitted none of the criteria in the article, was actually pretty good, was passed without corrections in 2010 and turned into a book that was published by a major publisher earlier this year. No-one has read either of them and I have been getting academic job rejection letters on a weekly basis for 2 1/2 years. And still, still, academics are banging on about PhDs like they're a big deal - they're not. They're really not. No-one gives a toss about PhDs.

- **raghvind rao** 8 July, 2012

please guide me to write the thesis in physical edcuation

- **Irene Smith** 25 July, 2012

At the very early stage of considering a PhD thesis, and struggling to find enough information to clarify the requirements, I found this article most helpful. The robust debate that followed underlines the dearth of information available, and the frustration of both researchers and examiners when the necessary clarity is missing.

Writing two years on from the start of this thread I can only say that nothing appears to have changed!

- **Romeo Santos** 11 August, 2012

One of the biggest failures of PhD thesis writing is if it were done based mostly on FORMAT than on SUBSTANCE...if it's all READING -WRITING and devoid of the empirical research that should be the basis of the writing in the first place. Let's do away with the habit of just borrowing other people's ideas, extrapolating and writing about them as if in a 'cut and paste' work. It's about time that we stop being just consumers of other people's ideas, of trying to squeeze 'new, terrific thoughts' out of famous writers' lines and opinions without genuine regard for innovation. It is not bad to make reference of other people's work [Foucault's, Giroux's], but to make a dissertation out of pure readings [and then writing] is a worn out way of doing a Ph D -especially if the references made are indiscriminate, non-validated grey literatures. 'Most books are trash, many people just found time to write' -and maybe because of passage of time and frequent quotes from unsuspecting readers [and Ph D writers] the works may just have gained 'currency' -whereas in reality, these are based only on personal opinions [of the writers], more of literary than empirical value, and lacking in

rigor and validity.

Thesis means 'theory' or 'argument' that we advance to enrich the frontier of knowledge. This can be done through rigorous research, not just tedious operation of 'READING and WRITING'.

- **Julie Meese** 20 August, 2012

@Romeo Santos

Extremely well said, sir!! If I were doing a PhD, I would hope to get a supervisor and examiners with your understanding. I would then hope that, on examination, they would see that the only purpose for that long list of references at the back of my thesis was to ensure that I could identify, and had read the right historical texts, authored by the most eminent minds in the field, and that I had then added something unique from my own efforts as a result of that interplay. Isn't that uniqueness a pre-requisite?

But hey, what the heck do I know!

- **Hilary Goy** 25 August, 2012

I too have had a poor experience of being supervised at PhD level to such an extent that it has affected my health. Supervisors need to be systematic about their responsibilities and make sure students know what is expected - that doesn't mean spoon feeding, but being clear about requirements and not being reactive, but proactive. I have had the experience of producing a piece of work which followed all the comments and then being told the topic was not in any case going to fulfil criteria when I had discussed the topic of that chapter before I started; also I had never seen these 'criteria' and the University Dept does not have a History PhD handbook. Michael Gove should be looking at the efficiency of this sector.

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- **The great unemployed** 29 August, 2012

I was less than impressed with my PhD supervision. Although I passed, I'm still very uptight about the supervision. It took ages to get feedback on individual chapters and I had to push for it. The feedback, when given, was extremely sparse and I'm not convinced the chapters were read in full. Sometimes I didn't get feedback on chapters. I was rarely asked to correct or modify stuff and probably spent a couple of hours over the three years making changes to my work. I've reason to suspect the main supervisor spent less than an hour reading the thesis prior to submission.

The viva was very tough and I received a lot of corrections - certainly more than either of my supervisors had given me over the three years. However, I cannot fault the examiners because they did their job and did it well. Sadly, I don't feel I can say the same for my supervisors but that's just my opinion.

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